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ABSTRACT

Organizational intersections are temporary systems formed when organizational members become interdependent with members in other organizations. The effectiveness of organizational intersections was an important issue for those participating in the Documentation and Technical Assistance in Urban Schools (DTA) Project. Consultants who participated in this project concerning the problem-solving capacities of urban schools developed guidelines to govern the operation and maintenance of effective organizational intersections. These guidelines are intended for those undertaking educational improvement efforts like team building, involvement of parents in curriculum change, or training for new roles in a school district. Three guidelines were developed. (1) Expect interpersonal and intergroup conflict when personal styles and self-interests are dissimilar, and establish norms that support the acknowledgement of these differences prior to commencing collaborative work and problem-solving. (2) Expect all representatives to be empowered to give away some resources and obligated to receive some resources in exchange, and therefore establish norms to support reciprocity among equals. (3) Expect communication difficulties, feelings of input overload, and confusion, and therefore establish norms that support using specific language to describe observable behavior and keep problem-solving simple and focused. (Author/JM)

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ORGANIZING FOR IMPROVEMENT IN EDUCATION:

ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL INTERSECTIONS

by

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This paper is a deliverable of the Documentation and Technical Assistance in Urban Schools Project. It was prepared in the Program on Strategies of Organizational Change at the Center for Educational Policy and Management with some support from the National Institute of Education. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the NIE, however, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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> The building in which we work is located at the corner of an intersection of streets, sidewalks, and bike paths near one edge of our University's campus. Without benefit of stop signs or a traffic light, pedestrians, motorists, and cyclists safely negotiate that intersection with suprising regularity. Another intersection, on the other side of campus, features brightly flashing traffic signals and clearly marked pedestrian crossings and auto turn lanes. There it is not unusual to hear the scream of brakes or to see piles of broken glass, remnants of a recent crash.
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> While crossing from one corner to another of the intersection near our building, it is possible to feel calm and optimistic about the passage. In spite of occasional confrontations and near misses, one can stand in the middle of the intersection with a certain amount of confidence. Crossing the other intersection, however, is quite another matter. There one is more likely to feel a surge of adrenalin and an urge to run home again.

Many people involved in efforts to improve education in this country have no doubt experienced similarly unpleasant feelings in their work. Some who feel the discomfort of being caught in an intersection intervene in and change schools in some way. They call themselves by different names--consultants, linkers, developer/demonstrators, field agents, facilitators--and they work for different agencies--state departments, private firms, school districts, regional laboratories, and research and development centers. Others have jobs which involve accepting and working with the outside change agents in order to improve their own practices or organizational arrangements. These people too are called by different names--teachers, administrators, parents, clients, users, consumers, or implementers.

What all those people have in common is that they simultaneously work in one organization and with people from one or more other organizations. They are "boundary spanners." They assume roles in interaction with people outside their own organization and become interdependent with those others in order to accomplish some specific tasks. For the purpose of using the products of educational research and development to improve educational practice, they form new and usually temporary systems that we call "organizational intersections."

A substantial body of literature is available to those who would create or work in organizational intersections for the purpose of educational improvement. Some of the literature (see Bennis and Slater, 1968 and Miles, 1964, for examples) emphasizes the temporary nature of most intersections. Other articles deal more specifically with the processes through which the outcomes of educational research and development are transmitted and come to be used in schools (see in particular the synthesis of five major studies by Emrick and Peterson, 1977). A third subset of the literature pertains to theories and technologies of consultation in schools by persons from "outside" those schools (see in particular Schmuck, Runkel, Arends, and Arends, 1977). Many of the important references in this literature were cited by Runkel and Burr (1977).*

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*Two recent additions to the literature are companions to this paper as products of the DTA Project. The first, by Runkel, Schmuck, Arends, and Francisco is titled Transforming Problems in Urban Schools into a Capacity for Solving Problems. The second, a forthcoming issue of Theory Into Practice tentatively titled "Renewing Urban Schools" will be edited by Schmuck, Francisco, Bell, Gross, and Bassin. We have tried not to duplicate ideas in those works in this paper, but instead to go beyond on the more narrowly-focused problem of organizational intersections.

The effectiveness of organizational intersections was a particularly important issue for those of us who participated in a project called Documentation and Technical Assistance in Urban Schools (DTA). That project--which commenced in January, 1975 and was completed in September, 1978--at times involved people from as many as fourteen different educational organizations. One of those, the Program on Strategies of Organizational Change (SOC) at the University of Oregon's Center for Educational Policy and Management, is our home organization. During the DTA Project, staff of the SOC Program interacted with a non-profit research and technical assistance contractor (the Center for New Schools, CNS, in Chicago, Illinois), a federal funding agency (the National Institute of Education, NIE), several schools and their district office in which we acted as consultants, and nine other school-level projects funded by the NIE from which we were to draw information about the problem-solving capacities of urban schools.*

As we spanned the boundaries of the SOC Program to work with people from other organizations, we experienced a range of comfortable and uncomfortable feelings resulting from our successes and lack of them at various organizational intersections. We tried to learn from our experiences and to draw from them some examples and concepts which we hope will help others who attempt similar work. We write this paper especially for an audience of policy makers and administrators who want to establish educational

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*In a paper this short it is impossible to describe fully or to cite all the references to the workings of the DTA Project or the organizations that participated in it. Readers with questions or requests for documents should contact the NIE, the Center for New Schools, or the SOC Program at CEPM.

improvement efforts requiring interdependence among people from different organizations. We are speaking to people who would set up or work in intersections more or less like the following examples from the DTA Project:

(1) Team building for a counseling department. Consultants from the SOC Program worked with a team of counselors from an urban high school on the West Coast. Meetings between one or two of the Program's representatives and the counselors occurred on the average of once a month for a period of more than a school year. The consultants traveled to the school in order to provide information about change efforts in other secondary schools across the country and to learn more about consultation in urban schools. The counselors interacted with the consultants to get help with clarifying their roles, improving their meetings, and negotiating their responsibilities with the school's administrators.

(2) Consultation for curriculum change involving parents. A curriculum developer and a parent from an innovative elementary school in the Midwest traveled to the West Coast to present a workshop for teachers and parents of an elementary school. The major purpose of the workshop was to launch a school-within-a-school in which parents could enroll to learn about the curriculum offered to their children or about other subjects of interest to them. The visitors at the workshop told how they had successfully developed ways to involve parents in the effort of improving their school, and the West Coast participants talked about how they might adapt the ideas for their own school.

(3) Training for new roles in a school district. The superintendent of a West Coast district reorganized secondary schools to support

a major effort at improving instruction. New roles for Instructional Assistant Principals (IAPs) were created and administrators were designated to assume them. The IAPs worked as a group with consultants from the SOC Program for several months to clarify their roles in relation to each other, their schools, and the district. They also received leadership training and help with planning for instructional improvement in their respective schools.

In each of these examples drawn from the DTA project, people from different organizations came together in an organizational intersection. For at least a brief time, they interacted with one another outside the boundaries of their respective home organizations in special structures such as workshops, retreats, meetings, or planning sessions. Actually, there were dozens of intersections within the DTA Project; we chose the examples to display the ranges in numbers of active participants (10 to 40), their duration (10 to 50 hours), and their formats or structures. Each example was also typical in that it was created as one part of an overall macro-design to build the problem-solving capacity of a school or the district.

In the remainder of this paper, we will describe some guidelines that, when followed, made the organizational intersections of the DTA Project work well, or when broken, led to dissatisfaction with the intersection on the part of those involved. Our guidelines were not derived intentionally. That is, we did not set out to follow or break them and there was no experimental design in the ordinary sense. The guidelines were derived empirically from our own trial and error experiences and will

guide us in future collaborations with other organizations. We offer them as a checklist for those who would create or participate in other organizational intersections and as hypotheses that deserve testing in future research on interorganizational effectiveness.

Guideline 1: Expect interpersonal and intergroup conflict when personal styles and self interests are dissimilar. Establish norms that support acknowledgement of differences prior to commencing collaborative work and problem solving.

Likenesses among people in terms of dress, attitudes, beliefs, manners, and language have been demonstrated to be important for building trust and rapport necessary for successful collaboration of people within and across organizations. In the collective wisdom of our culture and from empirical studies we know that successful boundary spanners are "like" others with whom they interact.

However, perfect homogeneity or homophyly in organizational intersections is almost never achieved. Although the heterogeneity of the work force in education does not reflect the composition of the population at large in this country, there are enough human differences to insure that every intersection will have members who are sufficiently unlike one another to have difficulties establishing trust and rapport. Differences in age, sex, race and ethnicity, education, and life style certainly characterize the groups in most intersections in education. More subtle heterogeneity caused by diverse ideologies also can be observed (see, for example, Wolcott's discussion of "teachers" and "technocrats" in education, 1977).

Goodlad (1975) has suggested that distinctions and differences among people must first be acknowledged if collaboration is to occur, and Karp (1976) has asserted that successful collaboration depends on appreciation of the other's uniquenesses. Neither suggests that perfect homophyly is a requisite to collaboration and effectiveness of organizational intersections. Instead, they suggest that dissimilarities among people, once they become public information, often can be the building blocks for inventive solutions to problems. The differences among people, it seems, promote creative tensions which alert people to the need for learning and adaptation.

In the DTA Project, we confirmed many times that it was important for participants in organizational intersections to talk about their ideas, feelings, and perspectives. In this way, any preconceived notions about each other's beliefs, values, and actions could be checked against the pluralism of attributes of the individuals involved.

In one school, for example, the principals asked consultants from the SOC Program to present a workshop for intermediate grade teachers on the use of manipulative materials in teaching mathematics. The consultants devised a plan for a one-hour meeting in which teachers were to describe the hardest thing about using manipulative materials and to create a booklet of "trade secrets" from their own experiences.

When the workshop began, one teacher immediately challenged the workshop plan, saying that teachers had not asked for help and did not need help with using manipulative materials. She further stated that she resented principal's having mandated attendance at the workshop after

regular school hours. Several other teachers chimed in, saying that the only problems they had teaching math were directly attributable to the new math program, devised by a few teachers and the principal, that had forced them to departmentalize instead of teaching math in their self-contained classrooms.

In a discussion among the teachers, the principal, and the consultants that lasted nearly an hour, feelings and preferences about in-service education for teachers, never before made public, became known to all. One outcome of the discussion was a collaborative decision that the workshop on manipulative materials would never take place. Another outcome was that the principal learned to involve teachers in making decisions about how and why they would interact with consultants from the SOC Program in the future. Subsequent interactions between the consultants and the teachers were designed collaboratively--an outcome made possible because time had been taken to discuss what individuals believed and wanted from their work together.

There was a good example in the DTA Project of difficulties that ensue when people are punished rather than rewarded for expressing and acknowledging their differences. In one meeting--attended by consultants from the SOC Program and Instructional Assistant Principals (IAPs) of secondary schools in a district--an IAP asserted his unhappiness and expressed his disagreement with certain policies and practices of the superintendent and staff of the district's central office. A representative of the superintendent (who was present at the meeting) became very angry and reacted to the IAP's assertive, frank remarks by arranging to have him

removed both from the meeting and temporarily from his position. The other IAPs heard what had happened to him, put two and two together, and for awhile became very reluctant to express ideas, feelings, and perspectives about their roles in the district and what was happening in their schools. During that period very little was accomplished during their interaction with the consultants, because they believed it too risky to acknowledge their feelings or to display any disagreement with the official "party line" of the district.

Guideline 2: Expect that all representatives will be empowered to give away some resources and obligated to receive some resources in exchange. Establish norms that support reciprocity among equals.

When representatives of different organizations interact in an organizational intersection, they find themselves involved in exchanging resources to accomplish their work. A conceptual scheme, developed and validated through research by Foa and Foa (1974), provides a way of classifying the material and symbolic resources that can be transmitted through interpersonal behavior. According to this scheme, people can give or receive love, status, information, money, goods, or services in their work together. Any of those resources can be more or less appropriate to be exchanged in a particular organizational intersection and some resources may be available in greater supply than others. For example, consultants from a research center may deliver research reports, literature reviews, training, and curriculum materials to a task force in a school in exchange

for descriptions of instructional problems, a plan for implementing some new program, or new research data collected from students and teachers.

When a representative of an organization participates in an organizational intersection, she or he is empowered to some degree to give away certain resources and is obligated to some degree by his or her home organization to work to receive other resources in exchange. As long as the representatives of different organizations in the intersection are empowered and obligated to roughly the same degree, interdependencies required by the work can be built and maintained. However, if representatives of one organization can more quickly or flexibly enter into "trade agreements" than their counterparts from the other organizations, or if representatives of one organization control the lion's share of resources required to do the work, the process of building interdependence can be stymied.

An example of what happens when representatives of different organizations are not similarly empowered and obligated occurred when consultants from the SOC Program were working with the faculty of an elementary school in the DTA Project. In initial meetings with the faculty, the consultants described the photos and slides being collected by documentors at schools. The teachers assumed that the consultants actually possessed the photos and slides, were empowered to give them away, and would soon provide copies that the school could use as it wished. Although the consultants never promised to deliver a certain number of slides at a particular time, the expectation was there on the part of the school participants nevertheless.

Difficulties arose when the consultants did not deliver the "goods" for several months because they could not get access to them. Many of the slides were undeveloped or uncatalogued and scattered around the country in offices of other DTA personnel. The consultants were, in short, not empowered to give a resource that teachers felt obligated to receive in behalf of their school. The reaction of teachers was to withhold resources (such as their time, affection, and esteem) that they could have given to the consultants and that the consultants were obligated by their funded scope of work to receive. Repeated confrontations over what happened to the slides took up time and slowed down the process of negotiating more substantive and profitable interdependence.

By contrast, there were other examples in the DTA Project of occasions where representatives of different organizations were equitably empowered and obligated. One such example occurred in the relationship between consultants from the SOC Program and the Instructional Assistant Principals (IAPs) of the district. With approval of the superintendent, the IAPs were empowered to provide information about their schools to the consultants. The consultants, in turn, were able to schedule their own trips to the district to coincide with the IAPs available time. Despite some logistical problems and one "bad scene," in which the consultants were not repaid for picking up an expensive dinner tab for some of the IAPs, the relationship between the representatives of the district and the SOC Program became a very productive one.

Guideline 3: Expect communication difficulties, feelings of input overload, and confusion. Establish norms that support using specific language to describe observable behavior and keeping problem solving simple and focused.

A great deal of support exists in the DTA archives for the following generalization: the development of an intersection is hampered to the extent that participants have different images in their heads of the present state of affairs, of states considered more desirable, or the steps they will take to move from one state to the other. One implication of this generalization is that it is important in building an intersection to develop explicit descriptions of those images. This can be done by using precise language which points to specific, observable behavior.

Precise language was not always used in the DTA Project, with the consequence that people from different organizations sometimes became quite frustrated with one another and unable to talk further. One particularly vague term that carried different meanings for different people was "technical assistance." In one school, for example, consultants from the SOC Program offered "technical assistance" to help the school establish a school-within-a-school for parents. The principal interpreted "technical assistance" to mean that the consultants would design the classes, teach them, handle recruitment and registration of parents. The consultants, by contrast, intended to do things such as convene planning sessions (not do the planning) and coach teachers in the school who would volunteer to teach the classes and recruit the parents. Not until the consultants clarified their meaning of "technical assistance" for the principal and got her to articulate her expectations in behavioral terms were they able to help her understand what they would and could do in the school and to negotiate next steps.

The failure to employ behavior-specific language also got in the way of collaboration among members of the SOC Program and other DTA staff across the country. Conflicts between advocates of "qualitative" and "quantitative" research and between believers in "top-down" and "bottom-up" technical assistance were both time-consuming and debilitating as long as the rhetoric of those in conflict was filled with vague, shorthand labels for complex ideologies. When more precise language was employed to talk about what people would be doing, the nature of differences among people became clear, and it became possible to negotiate compromises and to increase role differentiation for those who no longer chose to work together.

Another implication of the presence of different images in the heads of different participants is that it takes continual effort to simplify and focus problem-solving and to sort out discrepancies between actual and ideal states as they are viewed by different participants. The problems of input overload and confusion become extreme when a seemingly simple intersection between two organizations is actually a very complicated set of multiple interfaces between subparts of those organizations.

In the DTA Project, for example, there were several meetings in which nearly all professional staff (of CNS and SOC) were involved. In those meetings, problems discussed concerned not only the interface of the two organizations (e.g., the flow of funds from contractor to subcontractor), but also problems within and among the major functional teams (i.e., research, technical assistance, documentation, and management). The complexity of the DTA system demanded continual and simultaneous clarification of multiple

agendas; prioritization of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting goals, and efforts to strengthen communication in multiple sub-intersections within the larger one.

Summary

We have made an initial stab at identifying some guidelines that seem to us to govern the operation and maintenance of effective organizational intersections. We make no claim that the three guidelines described in this paper comprise an exhaustive list; others surely will want to add to the list we have started. We also hope others will regard our assertions as hypotheses which will help focus future research on the nature of organizational intersections.

However, until additional knowledge is generated, many of us may be more likely to navigate organizational intersections safely if we seek answers to the following questions as we go:

1. What kinds of attributes do the people in the intersection have in common? In what ways are they different?
2. How do people go about acknowledging variations among members of their group? What are the rewards for doing this?
3. What are representatives empowered to give and obligated to receive in the intersection? What sorts of material and symbolic resources are exchanged?
4. How equitably empowered and obligated are the representatives of different organizations in this intersection?

5. How specific is the language used by participants in the intersection? Are ideologies described in behavioral terms?
6. How are multiple problems simplified and focused upon? What are the rewards for continual attention to reducing confusion and input overload?

By paying attention to those questions we think people can accomplish more effectively the kind of work that is important to education today.

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